

## **Providing Access to Assessment: How Should IEP Teams Make Decisions about Accommodations**

*By Brian Jablonski, Elizabeth Potts, and Andrew Wiley*

Special education teachers are required to make hundreds and even thousands of difficult decisions and professional judgments over the course of a school year. One of the most challenging decisions is what accommodations should be provided to individual students participating in large-scale and high-stakes assessments.

Because of recent federal mandates, significantly more students with disabilities are participating in large-scale assessments. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) requires individualized education program (IEP) teams to identify the accommodations students with disabilities need to “level the playing field” and allow them to demonstrate what they have learned without their disability getting in the way. Without accommodations, test results may reflect limitations that are related to a student’s disability and *not* his or her true knowledge and abilities in a particular area.

Unfortunately, accommodations are a double-edged sword. Inappropriate accommodations can compromise the validity of student scores, resulting in a false picture of a student’s understanding and academic achievement. Inaccurate information about the performance of students with disabilities is harmful, because it impedes efforts to implement effective policies and classroom practices for these students. We all want to help our students do their best, but accommodations exist to adapt for the disability, not to make it possible for all students with disabilities to excel.

### **Choosing the Right Accommodations**

As IEP teams consider accommodations for large-scale and high-stakes testing, it is important to match accommodations to student needs based on (1) the student’s disability, (2) the age of the student, (3) the nature of the assessment (e.g., timed or not timed, multiple-choice or open response, etc.), and (4) the skill or academic area that is being assessed.

The student’s disability and level of achievement can affect how he or she will respond to an accommodation. Research has demonstrated that accommodations are less effective for students with mental retardation (MR) than for students with other disabilities such as learning disabilities (LD) and emotional/behavior disorders. The age of the student may also have an impact on the effectiveness of accommodations. For example, one research study found that elementary students benefited from a read-aloud accommodation on a math assessment, but middle school students did not benefit from this accommodation. It is also important to keep in mind the type of task being assessed. Research suggests open-response items tend to be more difficult for students with disabilities than for their non-disabled peers. Additionally, accommodations tend to be more helpful with open-response items than with multiple-choice items.

The growing body of research provides us with some clues about how to best accommodate students. As teachers and IEP teams consider which accommodations are appropriate for each individual student, they may want to consider these findings.

#### *Read-Aloud*

When considering read-aloud accommodations, bear in mind the following:

- Read-aloud accommodations are a legitimate accommodation on reading comprehension assessments, but change the usefulness of results with assessments that also measure decoding.
- Read-aloud is helpful for test items with more text and alternatively less useful for items with less text.
- Read-aloud accommodations are useful on math problem-solving assessments for many students with LD, but this accommodation may be detrimental for assessments that focus on computations.
- Students do better when they can set their own pace with a read-aloud accommodation, as when they have a tape player they can pause.
- Students with LD improve their performance from the standard math assessment when provided simplified language.

### *Extra Time*

When considering allowing a student extra time, take into account what the research says about extra time on high-stakes assessments:

- When allowed extra time, students with LD tend to benefit from using the time to answer more questions. But when students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are provided extra time, they still complete the assessment in the standard time limit. Consider using a flexible schedule for students with ADHD.
- Extended time tends to be more beneficial for high-ability students than for low-ability students.
- Use of some accommodations such as large print and Braille may create a need for extra time.

### *Other Accommodations*

For students whose disability impedes their ability to write, IEP teams should consider allowing them to dictate to a scribe or use a speech-to-text software program. Research has shown that students with disabilities increase the quantity and quality of their writing when dictating their responses, including when using speech-to-text software. Word processing software may also be useful for some students' written responses.

The use of calculators for mathematics tests is appropriate when assessing problem-solving ability but generally not appropriate when students are asked to demonstrate their ability to perform computations.

The most commonly used accommodation on state-wide and other large-scale assessments is small group or individual administration. There is little research to provide guidance about the use of this accommodation, with one exception: Students do perform better when taking an assessment with a familiar teacher.

Once the IEP team has chosen the appropriate accommodations, the student may need instruction to fully utilize the accommodations. Some technology may require specific training, and even the use of extra time may require a student to learn to budget that time appropriately.

As teachers and IEP teams prepare students to take high-stakes assessments, they should keep in mind what tasks the test will assess as well as how the student's disability effects his or her ability to demonstrate abilities on the test. The IEP team must also make sure that these accommodations match the accommodations used by the student in the classroom and on teacher-made assessments. With appropriate assessments, students with

disabilities can not only participate in high-stakes assessments, but also accurately demonstrate their proficiency.

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